Putin and the Costs of Being Wrong

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Since mid-2019, Moscow experiences a wave of public protests, triggered by the decision of the government not to allow several opposition candidates to run for the city parliament in the elections scheduled for September. According to the Moscow law, candidates running for the city parliament have to produce 4,500-5,500 signatures of voters registered in their district to be allowed to compete. The Moscow Electoral Committee, however, rejected a substantial portion of these signatures for most opposition candidates, thus disqualifying them from running. The reasons for rejection were often nonsensical or purely bureaucratic; appeals to courts did not change the situation (it suffices to say that courts refused to consider personal testimonies of individuals confirming that they actually did support an opposition candidate with a signature, if an “expert” of the Electoral Committee claimed that this signature was fraudulent). As a result, protests started. On 10 August, approximately 60 thousand people participated in an illegal demonstration; they were not deterred by the experience of the previous protests actions, brutal actions of the police, hundreds of people arrested after each demonstration and dozens of cases of criminal prosecution of protest leaders, participants or even bystanders.

The protests of the summer 2019 are not unique in the recent Russian history: In the last ten years, there have been several spikes of protest activity mobilizing tens of thousands of people (the best known being the protests after the falsified State Duma elections in December 2011). However, the Moscow summer of 2019 is unusual in two instances. First, the trigger for the protests appears to be disproportionally small as opposed to the scope of the event. The parliament of the City of Moscow is even weaker than other regional parliaments in Russia, so that the elections will have no influence whatsoever on the everyday life of people in the capital. The power (including the control over financial flows) rests in the office of the mayor. In the past, elections to the city parliament attracted negligible attention: in 2014, the turnout was only 21%. Second, it is not clear who is at the top of the protest movement. The police routinely arrest all possible heads of the opposition prior to the illegal demonstrations but people assemble nonetheless. Attempts at blocking certain streets or parts of the city for protesters only result in them moving to other parts of the city, with the demonstrations spreading throughout Moscow. While the governmental officials talk about (and seem to prepare for) well-organized and well-planned riots, demonstrations in Moscow seem to be an entirely different phenomenon – a peaceful rally, which comes to be through self-organization and spontaneous coordination of its participants.

How can we explain this unprecedented rise of spontaneous protests activity? For me, the protests in Moscow are an example of a core problem any authoritarian regime faces but which is frequently overlooked by the analysts and scientists: the risks of *mistakes.* Daniel Treisman from the University of California, Los Angeles, in a recent insightful study, shows that many cases of democratization throughout the last two hundred years happened not only because the structural preconditions

were right, but because the ruler *made a mistake*. Sometimes leaders overreact and use excessive force; sometimes they ignore troubling signs of the declining public support. The Moscow protests of 2019 appear to be a good example of how otherwise stable regime destabilizes itself through a number of ill-conceived decisions, and how the development of the regime could make mistakes more likely.

Over the course of his twenty-year rule, Vladimir Putin managed to create a powerful and consolidated autocracy. Opposition is marginalized and powerless; political institutions are fully subordinated to the leader; elites are united in their loyalty to the regime; provincial governors and wealthy business tycoons, who challenged the power of the president in the 1990s, are under control of Moscow. Although Russia entered a period of economic stagnation in 2013, the economy is functioning and the standard of living of most citizens is higher than prior to Putin's accession to power or during the Soviet times. Thus, Russian regime appears to be highly stable.

The problem is that by consolidating his power, Putin also made his regime more prone to err. First, more and more decisions are in the hands of the president. Putin systematically weakened all formal political institutions (Duma, courts or government), so that all important decisions are now made by a small circle around him. But this circle, over time, inevitably becomes isolated, misinterpreting what is going on in the country. On top of that, since the Crimean crisis in 2014, Putin personally seems to direct most of his attention to the foreign policy matters. Being fascinated by what he perceives as a global chessboard where he plays a game against the US, he neglects domestic developments. Second, elite members face a double challenge. On the one hand, they have to demonstrate their loyalty to the Kremlin. On the other hand, they do not know exactly what the expectations of the Kremlin are. How should they respond to new crises or challenges? Frequently the Kremlin does not know it itself (because, as mentioned, it lacks accurate information); but for the elites (governors or ministers) it means that, in the absence of clear signals from above, they have to experiment with the decisions they make. Sometimes it results in zealous over-fulfillment of the goals of the Kremlin; sometimes officials exercise excessive caution. Third, low-ranked bureaucrats also face a challenge. Unlike most Western counterparts, Russian bureaucrats are subject to a system of quantitative performance indicators, which they have to fulfill to stay in office or to receive a bonus payment. But at the same time, Russian bureaucratic culture is extremely formalistic: any deviation from the letter of the law can be punished by criminal prosecution (and law enforcement authorities, which have to improve their performance indicators, are eager to initiate this prosecution). The combination of these factors makes Russian bureaucrats extremely inflexible and interested in fulfilling formal requirements rather than actually contributing to the public good.

The frequency of mistakes is thus likely to go up. At the same time, the price of mistakes also increases. The stagnation of the Russian economy, while not able to destabilize the situation in the country *per se*, makes people more sensitive to mistakes of the government: actions, which would be forgiven and forgotten in a flourishing economic environment, cause massive disapproval. The willingness of the regime to maintain high military expenditures and to satisfy the appetites of the

elites forces the government to directly or indirectly cut social expenditures, which further increases the tension in the country.

In the last years, Russian bureaucracy and political class frequently made mistakes, leading to an increasingly critical reaction of the population. Ill-advised statements of bureaucrats and politicians causing public outcry (e.g., in 2018, a Sverdlovsk oblast official claimed that the state did not ask the parents to give birth to the children and hence does not own anything to young people); ill-conceived projects accompanied by embezzlement and miscommunication (e.g., the treatment of the waste from the city of Moscow, which has to be exported to facilities in other regions, or construction of new churches instead of public infrastructure); chaos in implementation of policy measures, making them extremely costly for people and businesses; and over-proportional reaction of the security services and police – all these decisions destabilize what otherwise could be a very stable regime.

The protests in the city of Moscow are but one example of how costly the mistakes of the regime can be. First, the officials responsible for the decision to exclude the opposition candidates from running, and especially for the blatant disregard of the law, under-estimated public reaction (people, who did not care about the city parliament elections in the past, were outraged because of the tools used to exclude candidates this time). Second, while dealing with protesters, the police used excessive force – and it exacerbated the protests rather than reduced them. Third, the government is unprepared for dealing with flexible networked protests like those unravelling in Moscow, and thus undertakes measures, which are meaningless in the current situation (e.g., arrests of the leaders). Fourth, the propaganda campaign of the government (e.g., blaming the protesters for receiving money from abroad or claiming that most protesters do not come from Moscow) does not appear to convince the city population. Many of these problems could have been avoided if the government had better information about the sentiments in the city or if the bureaucrats were more careful and flexible in devising their responses – but it does not happen in the modern Russia.

The main enemy of the Putin's regime thus appears to be Putin's regime itself. While the current protests in Moscow do not seem to threaten Putin's rule, they are but one more indicator of growing inability of the regime to devise effective responses to the challenges it faces – with unforeseeable long-term consequences.
